

Section III. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ESSEX

RPR

Section III. A REVISED REVITALIZATION CONCEPT

Introduction

The previous two sections have provided a comprehensive review of problems and potentials facing the community and public officials in revitalizing the downtown business core in Essex. This section reaches conclusions concerning the opportunities afforded by those potentials. Based on these conclusions, it suggests a revised revitalization strategy for the downtown that reflects accomplishments to date, changes that have occurred in the marketplace, and new public sector initiatives in Essex. The next and final section, Section IV, identifies activities and improvements that are still needed in the CBD and in the extended revitalization study area. And lastly, it recommends certain broad policies to guide continuing efforts to upgrade and rejuvenate the downtown.

Summary of Findings

The most significant conclusion reached in the research on existing conditions in the Essex CBD is that, while there have been substantial improvements to property, there has not been a corresponding improvement in business conditions. The retail development strategy that initiated revitalization efforts in Essex is in need of revamping. Completion of physical improvements should remain a priority, but the main focus of revitalization should turn more specifically to business development.

The following points should serve to capsulize the data and analyses of the previous sections and the Technical Appendix. Concerning potentials in Essex:

- o The CBD has been shown to be quite weak in shoppers goods and supermarket retail activity, but to be located centrally in a trading area in which demand for shoppers goods is quite underserved. This is especially true for goods such as apparel, furniture, and specialty items.
- o Potential for additional food stores in Essex is somewhat less, despite the plea from current shoppers and downtown merchants for a supermarket. The supermarkets in surrounding centers meet a good portion of existing and projected demand. Food product specialties might offer possibilities, however.
- o It is in the area of convenience goods -- notably, restaurants -- and personal services that Essex has had some activity. Even so, most local restaurants are mom and pop operations, and the CBD captures only a small portion of demand in the trading area. The fare at most restaurants is modest, as local patrons are price sensitive; however, ethnic specialties have been identified as options.
- o The predominant personal service in Essex is beauty and barber shops. While the number is small relative to trading area demand, there is a limit to the CBD's ability to absorb more of them. The demand analysis has identified a sizable potential for local-serving office-type services: banking and finance, insurance, real estate, medical, legal, and so forth.

Problems remain to be addressed in Essex, among them the following:

- o There has not been a substantial improvement in the retail mix in Essex since the 1976 plan. The market study and survey of merchants and shoppers indicate a small but loyal local following for the stores and restaurants in the CBD. There is still no sense of purpose among merchants, no will to organize for better promotion and marketing of the CBD.

- o The biggest single hindrance to Essex as a revitalized retail center is the volume of traffic on Eastern Avenue. The difficulties identified in all previous plans -- lack of access to parking, difficulties in turning, difficulty in pedestrian crossings -- still remain. Inadequate parking remains the chief complaint of merchants and shoppers.
- o The appearance of the CBD is vastly improved, due to the placement of planters, lights, sidewalk improvements, and so forth, as well as improvements to many of the facades in the CBD. Structures remain that need to be addressed, however. The burnt building at 425 Eastern Avenue is temporarily an eyesore but is under repair.
- o Two areas are still in need of improvement, however. First, the basic improvements that have been made in the 400 and 500 blocks west of Margaret Avenue need to be extended in the 500 block all the way to Woodward Avenue. As noted, a pocket park has been planned for the vacant Delia Motors site in this vicinity.
- o The other area needing basic streetscape and facade improvements is the extended study area to the west -- the 0 to 300 blocks of Eastern Avenue. Cracked sidewalks and curbs need to be replaced, and at least minimal street furniture and planters would be in order. Improving facades here will be a challenge, as a high proportion of all business structures are converted residences, some in poor repair. The structure at 122-140 Eastern Avenue (Mazer Brothers) is a pure retail facility with a wide pedestrian area; it should be targeted as a prime site for facade and concentrated streetscape improvements.
- o There is a need for more parking in Essex, but the greatest deficiencies appear to be in parking close to shops, rather than in the overall number of spaces available. Overall deficiencies in spaces for retail activities would be at least 100 percent according to zoning regulations; however, the large amount of vacant space and the low volume of sales at stores suggest that deficiencies in parking for shoppers are much less. A revitalized commercial core, on the other hand, would need more space for shoppers.

- o Visitors to the multi-service government center and the career training center keep the nearby non-metered lots full, pre-empting spaces for shoppers. It is likely that the government space generates many more trips than zoning normally attributes to offices (a proposed parking deck at the multi-purpose center was never built). Revenue authority lots at the edges of the CBD are underutilized (the spaces are metered).
- o More emphasis and attention should be directed toward the gateways to Essex. The setting for the community logo -- the Essex "cube" -- is a vacant lot adjacent to the nursing home at the western end of community, near the Back River bridge. It is in need of a facelift and warrants much better landscaping as an appropriate setting for the symbol of EDCO and the community. (Funds have been appropriated for such improvements.) Consideration should be given to establishing a similar gateway demarcation to the east of the community.

Strategy Implications

It is the conclusion of this report that the retail revitalization concept that has been the basis for past revitalization efforts needs to be reconsidered and possibly replaced with a more realistic alternative. Four factors lead to this conclusion:

1. The extensively landscaped village retail center concept is not likely to be achieved. Inability to obtain State cooperation in limiting traffic volume and in creating landscaped medians and pedestrian crossings are major reasons, plus simply the significant costs associated with the ambitious village center plan. Other problems include the inability to sufficiently stimulate facade improvements (e.g., through financial incentives) and lack of aesthetic control over those facade improvements that have been made. Improvements that have been made are important but also are uninspiring architecturally and do not create a unified image. The maritime theme suggested in the 1980 plan was somewhat artificial and has not taken hold, perhaps because there is no real maritime activity in the vicinity.

2. Diamond Point Plaza may seriously reduce the potentials for additional anchors in the CBD. The Essex CBD finds itself in the position of being sandwiched between two strip centers, each with supermarket and discount department store anchors -- too close to compete successfully with, yet too far away to benefit from their proximity in attracting shoppers. The attempt to create an antiques center was ill-fated; Essex is not an appropriate location for such a center, or perhaps for any upscale specialty shoppers goods.
3. Public facilities have not been successful as "twin anchors" to stimulate business in the CBD. The hope of the revitalization strategy of the 1980 Action Plan was that the government multi-purpose center and the County historical museum would be able to generate additional retail sales through increased visitation to the CBD. This has not happened. In the first place, the restricted hours and modest patronage of the museum are too limited to have much impact. In the second place, visitors to the government center are there primarily for social services; they tend to be of limited means and do not constitute a stable market for retail in the CBD. In fact, their domination of available parking may actually be a detriment to business in the CBD.
4. An Alternative use is planned for the major available retail space in the CBD. The business incubator that has been proposed recently represents a de facto decision to pursue broader economic development objectives in Essex than simply commercial revitalization. This facility would have positive links with the County careers center and would provide important business development assistance opportunities in the community. It would also pre-empt the major available retail space in the CBD, however, further limiting the viability of attempting to attract a major commercial anchor. The challenge will be to take this new initiative and use it to create a new thrust to revitalization in the Essex business district.